

**CHAPTER – IV**  
**IDENTITY CRISIS**  
**OF THE KOCH**  
**RAJBANSHI**

## CHAPTER – IV

### IDENTITY CRISIS OF THE KOCH RAJBANSHI

Social entities have time and again tried to seek their identity either by relating to their glorious past or by demonstrating their present status that has not been recognized by others. People are getting conscious of their identity and are sensitive about it. People fight, confront or even negotiate and re-negotiate concerning their identity.<sup>1</sup>

Every ethnic group is very enthusiastic to preserve their identity. At present, the Koch Rajbanshi of North Bengal and Assam are jointly striving to preserve their ethnic identity. They have been struggling for it for quite some time. Over time and space it has changed a lot. The Koch Rajbanshi had been facing with an identity crisis since time immemorial. They made their first popular attempt to tackle with this identity crisis during the British rule in India in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century through the Kshatriya movement. At present, they are still striving for it with new vigour, methods and demands through the Kamatapur movement.

Since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century a debate had existed between the colonial and the indigenous writers regarding the identity of the Koch Rajbanshi. This changing definition of the Koch Rajbanshi during the colonial period is studied below:

There existed a debate till recently to the fact that whether the Koch and the Rajbanshi are two different identities or just one. Many a times efforts were also made to differentiate the two from each other. The term “Rajbanshi” is of recent origin. The earlier reference to it is found in Buchanan Hamilton’s report<sup>2</sup> and then they are mentioned in all ethnographic monographs, land revenue settlement reports, district gazetteers and census report on Bengal.<sup>3</sup> The districts in which they were mostly to be found were Rangpur, Cooch Behar, Jalpaiguri, Dinajpur, Malda and Darjeeling in North Bengal, Purnia in Bihar and Goalpara in Assam, but about 89 percent of this caste population lived in just four districts i.e. Dinajpur, Rangpur, Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar.<sup>4</sup>

They were the indigenous inhabitants of North Bengal and the third largest Hindu caste in the whole region. The census commissioners and the colonial ethnographers however, faced a major problem regarding the identification of these

Rajbanshis. The most problematic question was whether the term Rajbanshi and Koch are synonymous or not.<sup>5</sup>

This period witnessed two trends in the study of caste- one initiated by the colonial rulers and the other by the indigenous elites.<sup>6</sup> The study of these literatures on caste instead of clarifying our doubts further complicates our knowledge about various social groups and their respective social position.

The area where the Koch Rajbanshis were to be found in large numbers formed parts of the old Kingdom of Kamrup, of which Modern Assam was also a part.<sup>7</sup> A number of tribal group like the Danabs, the Kiratas, the Ahoms, the Khens, the Koches etc. ruled over various parts of Kamrup. Among these groups the Koches established their control in the western parts of Kamrup under the leadership of Biswa Singha by the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century.<sup>8</sup> During this period nowhere we can find any mention to the term Rajbanshi either in the Persian records, the foreign accounts, in the Assam Buranjis or in the Darrang Raj Vamsavali. In the Brahmapurana there is a comprehensive list of mixed castes. In this list also there is no mention of Rajbanshi though there is a reference to the origin of the Koches.<sup>9</sup>

Thus, there is an inevitable question as to the origin of the term 'Rajbanshi'. Opinions vary in different official and non-official works regarding this. There are broadly two lines of argument regarding the origin of the Rajbanshi - one by the colonial official - cum – ethnographers and the other by the Rajbanshi caste publicists. In the colonial literature the Rajbanshis were generally regarded as a purified group of 'Koch' who had adopted Hindu culture and caste norms abandoning their traditional cultural practices and social norms.<sup>10</sup>

The earliest reference to the Rajbanshis is found in Buchanan Hamilton's report "Account of the District of Rangpore, 1810" states that the Koch Rajbanshis, both being part of the larger Bodo stock, belong to the same caste. The report however, says that not all the Rajbanshis are Koch, although most of them are. Those who have become degenerated by adopting the profession of palanquin bearer are Koch and amongst them, those who have further degraded by taking to the habit of eating pork, chicken etc are Dahoi or Garo.<sup>11</sup>

B.H. Hodgson wrote that when Viswa Singha the grandson of Hajo, and the founder of the Koch Kingdom, embraced Hinduism, the country was renamed Bihar and the people as Rajbanshi.....<sup>12</sup>

W.W. Hunter too thought that the Rajbanshis were the offshoots of the Koch tribes. According to him the Koch tribe first came into prominence by the close of the fifteenth and beginning of the sixteenth century when they established the powerful Koch Kingdom. During the reign of Biswa Singha, Brahminism was introduced and the people including the King and his officers embraced the religion. On their conversion to Hinduism they abandoned the name 'Koch' and took the name 'Rajbanshi' which literally means 'Royal race'.<sup>13</sup>

H.B. Rawney describes that as a result of intermarriage of the Koches with the Hindus, their ancient behavior, manner, culture and religious rites have undergone substantial changes. A part of the tribes thus Hinduised and converted is Rajbanshi.<sup>14</sup>

Similarly G.A. Gierson in the Linguistic Survey of India, 1904 also noted that the Rajbanshis are the Hinduised Koches.<sup>15</sup>

According to Herbert Risley, "Koch, Koch- Mandi, Rajbanshi, Palliya and Desi belong to a large Dravidian tribe of North- Eastern and Eastern Bengal amongst whom there are grounds for suspecting some admixture of Mongolian blood..... the transformation of the Koch into Rajbanshi, the name by which they are now known in Rangpur, Jalpaiguri and Kuch or Koch Behar is a singular illustration of the influence exercised by fiction in the mixing of caste..... Now the great majority of Koch inhabitants of North Bengal invariably describe themselves as Rajbanshis or 'Bhanga Kshatriyas' – a designation which enables them to pose as an outlying branch of the Kshatriyas who fled to these remote districts in order to escape from the wrath of Parasuram..... They keep Brahmans, initiate Brahmanical ritual in their marriage ceremony and have begun to adopt Brahmanical System of 'Gotras' ..... They are thoroughly Koch under the name of Rajbanshis to be a provincial variety of Kshatriyas..... The original nucleus of Rajbanshi was certainly Dravidian."<sup>16</sup>

Other British ethnographers and officials like E.T. Dalton, Thompson, Porter, Sir Edward Gait etc. also observed in a similar manner regarding the origin of the Rajbanshis. To put it in brief, the colonial literature generally maintained that the

Rajbanshis were a section of the Koch people who had abandoned their traditional cultural practices and had adopted the Brahminical culture. However, there was also a belief among some colonial ethnographers that all the Rajbanshis were not Koch.<sup>17</sup>

On the other hand, the indigenous literature contested the observations made by the British ethnographers and officials. According to them, the Rajbanshis were referred to as different from and superior in rank to the Koch. For example Monomohan Roy wrote, “Irrespective of any question as to the identity or difference of origin, the Rajbanshis and Koches form entirely distinct castes.”<sup>18</sup>

Harakishor Adhikari also claimed that the Koch and the Rajbanshis were not the same caste and the Rajbanshis were different in many ways. The food habit, behaviour and customs of the Koch spoke of their lower social status and the upper caste Hindus, comprising the Rajbanshis, did not maintain social relations with them. In fact Adhikari stressed that the Rajbanshis, on the other hand should be regarded as an upper caste which is borne out by their food habits, behavior and customs. They did all their ceremonies and rituals in the fashion of the Kshatriyas and other upper caste Hindus. He also challenged the argument that the Rajbanshis adopted Hinduism during the reign of Biswa Singha. According to him the Rajbanshis were Hindus before the reign of Biswa Singha and were recognized as Bhanga Kshatriyas.<sup>19</sup> As according to the Shastras the term Bhanga Kshatriya had no meaning so they had become recognized as ‘Rajbanshis’.<sup>20</sup>

Upendranath Barman also debated in a similar way that the Rajbanshis were Kshatriyas and lived in the land called ‘Paundra Desa’, between the river Karatowa and Ganga. He refuted the argument of colonial ethnographers by citing examples from the Hindu Shastras and Puranas and he wrote that the Rajbanshis were claiming the Kshatriyas status long before the eighteenth century.<sup>21</sup>

Maniram Kabya Bhusan, Manbhola Barman and many others of the Rajbanshi literati also asserted the same mythico- historical claim of a Kshatriya origin.<sup>22</sup>

Thus, the key argument of the indigenous writers was that the ‘Koch’ and ‘Rajbanshi’ were not synonymous terms. Rather the name ‘Rajbanshi’ was very much there before the conversion of Biswa Singha to Hinduism in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century.

Keeping aside the arguments, at present there is a general agreement to the fact that the Koch and Rajbanshi are not two different identities but one. In North Bengal they are popularly referred to as Rajbanshi and in Assam as Koch Rajbanshi. Rajbanshi is taken to be the shortened form of the term “Koch Rajbanshi”. The term “Rajbanshi” as applied to the Koches is of recent origin and therefore the contention that this term was applied to them immediately after their Hinduisation in the time of their state formation, as held by Gait and others is not well founded.<sup>23</sup> Rather it is possible that when the Koches became conscious of their glorious past at a later period, they began to call themselves as Rajbanshi which meant descendants of the Royal blood. This new appellation also made them feel somewhat superior to the rest of their kinsmen.<sup>24</sup> Thus, we see that the Koch Rajbanshis had to battle with an identity crisis from quite an early period.

#### **Kshatriya Movement – Kshatriya identity:**

The assertion of the ‘Kshatriya’ identity by a section of the Koch Rajbanshi dates back as early as in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>25</sup> Then in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century in the Account of Rangpur and Dinajpur by Buchanan Hamilton we also find references to a Rajbanshi claim for Kshatriya origin.<sup>26</sup> This demand for Kshatriya status was reiterated with a new dynamism towards the close of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and around this claim an organized movement gradually developed among them from the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In the social ladder of Bengal, the Koch Rajbanshis were placed at the lowest rung of the society along with the Namasudras, the Pods and the other Antyaja castes. To this, those whose conditions were comparatively much better both economically and educationally than their counterparts were not ready to bear this lower caste stigma anymore and therefore argued and appealed in favour of their Kshatriya status. The reasons for this specific change in their attitude can be explained as follows:-

Firstly, the economic basis of the Indian caste system acted as one of the primary reason for the change in their attitude at a point of time. With the collapse of the traditional economy brought about by Colonial rule which was then followed by urbanization and creation of new avenues for job, the village society failed to retain its insularity, as the scope for horizontal mobility increased.<sup>27</sup> Urban influence and modern education expanded the world view of a limited section of the lower castes

and they found in their ascribed caste status a major block in their way to upward mobility.<sup>28</sup> This motivated them to look for ways and means to rectify the existing social anomalies. At such a critical period the colonial caste policy helped them to find a way out, while remaining within the caste system itself. Caste was then officially recognized as a category in social policy formulation and as a result the distinction between the upper and the lower caste which was essentially a social and cultural dichotomy was now given a definite political shape.<sup>29</sup>

It was mainly from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century onwards that the colonial policy was given a new direction in order to safeguard the interest of certain underprivileged groups.<sup>30</sup> This policy definitely strengthened the caste identities and indirectly encouraged mobilization along caste lines. It all started with the government policy of helping those who belonged to the lowest rung of the society. The Government took special care to motivate the boys of these classes to go to schools.<sup>31</sup> Special schools were opened in the backward areas and education for them was made highly subsidized.<sup>32</sup> Special grants were made to construct hostels for different backward castes like the Namasudras, the Jogis, the Rajbanshis etc.<sup>33</sup>

The protective measure of the colonial government for the depressed classes in due course of time strengthened the prevailing caste identities. This policy, which apparently appeared as a welfare measure actually infused a new spirit among the lower castes to work for caste solidarity so as to assert their own separate identities.<sup>34</sup> Thus, it ultimately led to a wide gap between the upper and the lower castes.

The existing situation of the region also led to the Koch Rajbanshi's demand for the Kshatriya identity. With the entry of the British in the administration of the region, a different phase of the Koch Rajbanshi started. The East India Company's entry into the region was marked by their interest in trade and commerce and further access to the North East Frontier of India. The British in order to run their administration and for their political purposes brought English educated Hindu upper caste gentry. The immigration and settlement of this group of people increased in due course of time and they gradually began to dominate over the indigenous Koch Rajbanshi people. They began to hold all the important position in administration while the natives remained educationally, economically, politically and socially backward. The immigrant upper caste gentry in course of time had become the most

dominant group in the local society, economy and politics.<sup>35</sup> They began to hold all the important position in the administration and gradually became a leading landholding class. This newly settled group of people exercised an attitude of cultural supremacy over the Koch Rajbanshi, the indigenous people of the region which prevented the growth of a close relation between the two. In due course of time, this alienation of the Koch Rajbanshi and the upper caste Hindu gentry promoted in the formation of caste solidarity among the Koch Rajbanshi.

The sense of alienation among the Koch Rajbanshi was further strengthened by the insults and humiliation that they faced due to the domination of the Brahminical culture.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, the literary works of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century also disgraced the dignity of the Koch Rajbanshi. They were referred as 'backward, uncultured and even antyaj'<sup>37</sup> in most of the literary works of the period. They were not permitted to enter the places of worship on the occasion of any public celebration or pujas nor were they allowed to enter the kitchen of the upper caste Hindus. Even water was not accepted from their hands by the upper caste Hindus.<sup>38</sup> The Koch Rajbanshi of both North Bengal and Assam faced this kind of social harassment. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century they were even denied entry into the temple of Jagannath Puri by an act of the Government in the year 1911.<sup>39</sup> In Assam also the Koch Rajbanshis were deprived of entry in the famous Barpeta Kirtan Ghar, a prayer place for the Vaishnavite sect of Assam, situated in Barpeta town of Lower Assam. For this entry in the Barpeta Kirtan Ghar, they had to fight a legal battle in the then Calcutta High Court.<sup>40</sup> They were given different rows to sit on the occasion of any public lunch or dinner. Initially they were not allowed to touch the wells of the upper castes but with the beginning of the Kshatriyaization Movement these prejudices were gradually done away with.

Thus the nature of caste hatred and ill-treatment that the Koch Rajbanshis faced at the hands of the upper caste Hindus proves that their community didn't occupy a respectable social position in the status estimation of the upper caste Hindus. This resulted in the development of a sense of isolation among the Koch Rajbanshis, leading to the generation of spirit of community solidarity amongst them. Their search for Kshatriya identity was only a symbolic cultural expression of this emergent collective self-consciousness.<sup>41</sup>

The above narrative tells us about the disgrace and caste hatred experienced only by the Koch Rajbanshi elites and practically no account of the Rajbanshi peasants' interaction with the upper caste Hindus is given. This very fact points out that it was the elite among the Koch Rajbanshis who became more conscious about caste discrimination, as in spite of their material and cultural progress they didn't get equal social status with their caste Hindu counterparts.<sup>42</sup> Thus faced with such a situation, these group of Koch Rajbanshi elites looked for collective mobilization as the means to achieve their ends. There were other factors too which motivated them to go for a popular movement. The Koch Rajbanshi elites who were aspiring for Government jobs and representation in various self-governing bodies were largely affected. They were not able to compete with their upper caste counterparts who were then already dominating the system. Therefore, being unable to compete with them, they started using caste idiom to voice their grievances. Their aspiration for higher social status and political power motivated the Koch Rajbanshi elites to develop among the Koch Rajbanshi in general an articulate caste consciousness in order to launch a well-organized movement for social justice.<sup>43</sup>

The ultimate factor which gave a boost to the Koch Rajbanshi caste leaders to mobilize their community members and to claim a Kshatriya status was the Government policy of enumerating Hindu castes in the census reports on the basis of 'social precedence as recognized by native public opinion'.<sup>44</sup>

L.S.S. O' Malley wrote that "..... There was a general idea in Bengal that the object of the census is not to show the member of persons belonging to each caste, but to fix the relative status of different castes and to deal with questions of social superiority.....". This warrant of precedence gave rise to considerable agitation at the time and proved a legacy of trouble.<sup>45</sup> The census operations created a notion among the members of the various lower and intermediary castes that if they could have their names listed in the census reports in the category of twice born, their social rank would automatically be raised and recognized by the indigenous society.<sup>46</sup> This false concept on census among the indigenous people led to the growth of caste movements and associations. The Koch Rajbanshis also had this notion. A.K. Roy had observed, '..... The origin of Kshatriya movement could be located in the hatred and ill treatment received by the community at the hands of the upper castes of the Hindu society but the immediate cause of this movement was the Census of India, 1891'.<sup>47</sup>

Thus we see that the Koch Rajbanshi's effort to claim a Kshatriya descent was a result of Brahmainical cultural domination, British protection policy of the lower caste, the social changes brought about by the colonial rule and finally the census operation.

The path that the Koch Rajbanshi caste leaders followed to move upward in the caste hierarchy was commonly to claim affiliation to one of the three upper varnas and then in support of that status, to change the norms of religio-cultural behaviours and to create myths which proved their claimed origin.<sup>48</sup> The leaders on the one hand tried to cultivate a consciousness about their Kshatriya identity among the Koch Rajbanshi through the methods of socio-religious and cultural reforms. On the other, they sought to legitimate their claim by appealing to the traditional custodians of social hierarchy- the pundits and to the modern arbiters of social rank- the colonial rulers.<sup>49</sup>

The Koch Rajbanshi movement for Kshatriyaization centered on a number of myths which tried to pursue their Kshatriya origin. The legend noted in the Census report of 1901 regarding their origin is as follows:-

The Koch Rajbanshis of North Bengal wished to be styled Bhanga or Bratya Kshatriyas and to be categorized amongst the twice born castes. They tell various stories of their origin, the favourite one being the descendents of Kshatriyas who discarded their sacred threads when fleeing from the wrath of Parshuram.<sup>50</sup>

Another myth which was at that period very popular regarding their origin is enumerated as well. In the introduction to their Memorandum to the Indian Statutory Commission, the Koch Rajbanshis stated that,

They (the Rajbanshi Kshatriyas) were once the ruling race in this part of the country sometimes with divided territories and different capitals, their last capital being Kamta Behar also known as Gosanimari now with the state of Cooch Behar. About 450 years ago sudden aggression made by Muhammedan invaders from Bengal brought about secretly by some non-Kshatriya traitors surprised and made away with the late Raja Kamteswar, leaving the people quite consterned and without a recognized head.<sup>51</sup>

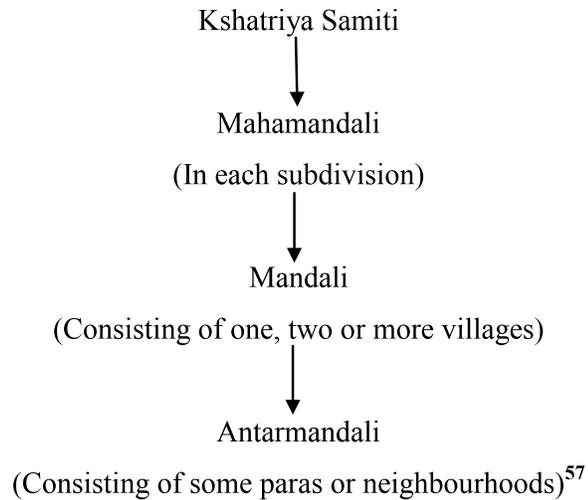
This account further states that first the Muslim invaders and then their 'Hindu Camp followers' looted this land and established their control on all matters in order to keep the local people under their tight control.<sup>52</sup>

Apart from these legends, a number of myths were created and recreated. These myths differed in some way or the other. But they are all unanimous in trying to bring forth a convincing myth to prove their Kshatriya origin.

After the creation of myth efforts were made for reform of socio-religious and cultural practices of Kshatriya like customs, shortening of the period of ceremonial mourning after bereavement and acceptance of Kshatriya surnames such as Barma, Roy, etc., in place of the existing ones like Das, Sarkar, Mandal etc.<sup>53</sup> Moreover restrictions were also levied on the freedom of the women folk as an emulation of the upper caste Hindu women. Similarly, widow remarriage was done away with. Foods which were not allowed by Hindu religion were prohibited from taking. At the same time, initiative was also taken to get favourable rulings from the pundits of various places in support of their claim to Kshatriya origin and their right to wear the sacred thread.<sup>54</sup>

These reform activities soon began to influence a small group of the Koch Rajbanshi and motivated them to mould their social behavior in accordance with the Kshatriya model. But very soon they understood that mere propagation would not help in achieving their goal. They felt the need for an organization under whose shelter they could carry out their movement for Kshatriyaization further. So, under the leadership of Panchanan Burma, the Kshatriya Samiti was formed in 1910 at Rangpur, with the professed goal of carrying forward the task of social and political mobilization among the Koch Rajbanshis.<sup>55</sup> The Samiti was later formally registered and it also developed its own constitution to regulate the various activities.<sup>56</sup>

In order to reach out to the mass of the Koch Rajbanshi peasantry which was spread over a number of districts, the Kshatriya Samiti developed a multilayered organizational set up. The structure was as follows:-



Efforts were also made to develop caste consciousness among the peasants and the students. In 1920, the first monthly journal called 'Kshatriya' was published by the Kshatriya Samiti which attempted to spread the ideals of the Samiti among the masses. Besides this, it aimed for reconstructing an imagined history of the Koch Rajbanshi Kshatriyas, for appealing to the present generation to receive their Kshatriya spirit, and to strengthen the bonds of community solidarity.<sup>58</sup>

The movement for Kshatriyaization was not limited merely to the assessment of upper caste culture and religious behavior. Efforts were also made in various ways to reawaken the Kshatriya martial spirit and to regenerate the community through educational reforms. They also tried to develop linkages with the All India Kshatriya Movement and were also successful in doing so to a large extent.

However, in due course of time the movement gradually fizzled out. Although the movement talked about education, public employment and military success, none of the issues in reality dealt with the common men i.e., the peasantry. Moreover the non-inclusion of any economic reform in the agenda of the Samiti also made it less popular among the peasantry.<sup>59</sup> Therefore it was less effective in organizing the community as a whole. With time the movement which started as a struggle for social regeneration gradually turned into a political movement and it remained confined to the elites, thus becoming less popular among the majority of the community. Finally with the inclusion of the community into the list of Scheduled Castes for Bengal the movement began to lose its relevance and gradually fizzled out.

It is however, apparently paradoxical that after having led a movement for the Kshatriya status of the Koch Rajbanshi, Panchanan Burma began to demand for scheduled caste status for the Koch Rajbanshi. Infact being a member of the constituent committee, Panchanan came into close contact with Baba Saheb Bhim Rao Ambedkar and began the campaign to include the Koch Rajbanshi as scheduled castes in the constitution to gain constitutional safeguard for the Koch Rajbanshi who were subjected to prolonged state of social deprivation and economic backwardness. However the movement for the demand of Scheduled caste was then not popular in Assam.

The Koch Rajbanshis are given different status in different states. In West Bengal they are given Scheduled Caste status, in Meghalaya they are given Scheduled Tribe status and Other Backward Class category in Assam and Bihar.<sup>60</sup> Thus, there is no uniform set of status to this particular community.

In North Bengal also the Koch Rajbanshis were found to have passed through at least three district identities in different censuses – from Rajbanshi to Bratya Kshatriya(1891), Bratya Kshatriya to Kshatriya Rajbanshi(1911,1921) and Kshatriya Rajbanshi to only Kshatriya (1931).<sup>61</sup>

At present, in Assam they are demanding for a Scheduled Tribe status. However the recent increase of identity consciousness as well as the demand for Scheduled Tribe in Assam shows its deep resentment against the Government as well as other dominant cultural entities that have for a long been paying no heed to its cultural and socio-political privileges as well as resisting its demand of Scheduled Tribes respectively. Today, the very demand of Scheduled Tribe status by the Koch Rajbanshi in Assam has opened up a theoretical space for one of the most marginal groups to confront and renegotiate with the identities like Bengali and Assamese that have for a long time been the dual identity of this community.<sup>62</sup> The community feels that for long they have been dominated and oppressed by the dominant cultural entities in Assam as well as in Bengal.

In Assam, the movement for Scheduled Tribes status for the Koch Rajbanshi began in 1968. In the All Assam Koch Rajbanshi Kshatriya Samilani convention held at Chautara in Kokrajhar, on 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> Feb, 1969, this demand for Schedule Tribe became part of the formal agenda of the Koch Rajbanshi movement.<sup>63</sup> In 1996, the

Constitution (Scheduled Tribes) Order (Amendment) Bill to provide for inclusion of the Koch Rajbanshi in the Scheduled Tribe list was introduced in the Lok Sabha. Then the bill was referred by the house to a 15 member committee, which in turn endorsed the inclusion of the community in the Scheduled Tribe list. As Parliament was not in session at that time, the Constitution (Scheduled Tribe) Order (Amendment) Ordinance 9 of 1996 was promulgated to give effect to scheduling of the Koch Rajbanshi community in Scheduled Tribe (Plains) list of Assam. The said ordinance was re-promulgated three times, but the bill never went for a voting and since then the issue has been hanging. The community enjoyed Scheduled Tribe (Plains) status for one year. The Tribal Research Institute of the Assam Government in its study found adequate justification for inclusion of the Koch Rajbanshi community in Scheduled Tribe list in 1994.<sup>64</sup> Based on the said report, the Registrar General of India had also given 'no objection' to the inclusion of the community in the Scheduled Tribe list of Assam subsequently. The furor over the delay in granting the Scheduled Tribe status has led to a number of agitations by various organizations representing the community. As the Scheduled Tribe movement seemed to fail to yield any concrete result, frustration crystallized into a major articulation for revival of their erstwhile Kamatapur as a separate state.<sup>65</sup> However, recently the government has declared that Scheduled Tribe status would soon be given to 6 tribes of Assam including the Koch Rajbanshi. **(Appendix – G)** But the delay again over this is creating great resentment amongst the Koch Rajbanshi. **(Appendix - H)**

There are also other reasons for the existing identity crisis. They live within politically demarcated areas where Bengali and Assamese people form the majority. In North Bengal they are in close proximity to the Bengalis while in Assam they are in close proximity to the Assamese. So, because of their long assimilation with these communities they are mostly drawn within the orbit of the Bengalis and Assamese. Thus Bengali and Assamese have for a long time been the dual identity of this community. They also feel that for a long time they have been oppressed and dominated by these dominant cultural entities in Bengal as well as in Assam. Their deteriorated social, economic and political condition and marginalization of the Kamatapuri language and culture also directly or indirectly contributes to the prevailing identity crisis of the Koch Rajbanshi. Moreover, some of them also prefer to use the speech of these dominant communities rather than Kamatapuri speech

which in turn is leading to the erosion of Kamatapuri language and literature. All these factors directly or indirectly contribute to the prevailing identity crisis of the Koch Rajbanshi.

### **Kamatapur Movement:-**

Though we have heard about the Kamatapur Movement recently but the idea for a separate homeland for the Koch Rajbanshi is not a new one since demand for a separate state for the Koch Rajbanshi had existed since pre-independence days. According to Sujata D. Hazarika, a gentleman from undivided Bengal named Jogendranath Mandal, had demanded a separate state for the Koch Rajbanshis called “Rajar-sthan” or “Abode of King” as early as before independence. He feared that if Bengal were divided, a section of the backward classes (particularly the Koch Rajbanshi) would be dominated by the upper caste Hindus while the other would be under the Muslims.<sup>66</sup>

The Kamatapur Movement is a recent upsurge in North Bengal and Assam which is an ultimate outcome of the struggle for power and the associated privileges between the indigenous community (particularly Koch Rajbanshi) and the Bengali and Marwari immigrants.<sup>67</sup> It exemplifies the efforts of an indigenous community in putting up a resistance to their gradual economic marginalization and erosion of cultural and linguistic identity in the guise of a development process which was primarily divided through land acquisition.<sup>68</sup>

The factors and forces leading ultimately to the demand of a separate state in the form of the Kamatapur Movement are enumerated as follows:

With the rapid growth of industrialization and the growing of the tea gardens in North Bengal most of the land which was earlier owned by the indigenous community was bought by the Bengali and Marwari immigrants. This marginalization of the indigenous people had in due course of time given rise to feeling of alienation and unrest among them which is further aggravated by the apathy shown by the mainstream society composed mainly of the Bengali and Marwari community.<sup>69</sup> These immigrant communities who came to North Bengal after independence had good economic background. They also had a strong cultural awareness with a good knowledge of cultivation. In front of this developed culture, modernity of language,

education and efficiency, the indigenous Koch Rajbanshis couldn't stand anywhere and they gradually lost their culture, language and land. Above all they became minority due to the flow of this immigrant and ultimately lost their last asset, which was their identity.<sup>70</sup>

Thus being separated from their land and traditional occupation and eroded of their cultural and linguistic identity they found themselves at the receiving end of a degrading eco - system and an alien social structure which is indifferent to their traditional identity.<sup>71</sup> This feeling of deprivation has led to the development of an identity consciousness among the Koch Rajbanshi in terms of their history, language, occupation land rights and traditional social structure.

All these together with the government paying no heed towards the welfare and development of the Koch Rajbanshi has further intensified the feeling of alienation and has led to the demand of a separate Kamatapuri state.

The primary reason behind this ethnic upsurge and transition of movement from reformatory stage to transformative stage can be seen in a series of vital developments.<sup>72</sup> Being thrown away from their own land they lost their most important source of living. Land dispossession led them to the loss of their cultural and historical identity. With the settlement of these groups of new people and their dominance over the Koch Rajbanshi people in particular led to gradual loss of their identity even their own language. The Koch Rajbanshi language or the Kamatapuri language in due course of time was also overshadowed by the Bengali and Assamese language in North Bengal and Assam respectively and gradually it became the dual identity of the Koch Rajbanshi. This language could not flourish into a modern language because of the fact that they failed to receive any patronage and support from the state government. The neglect and the downfall of the language can be seen when the British imperialist imposed and popularized Bengali language in this region.

The underdevelopment of the region and the people also placed them far behind in the race of competition with the other community members of the new settlers. The economic dislocation and cultural distortion had pushed the people into the dormant.

This region is also known for its rich natural resources like invaluable forest product, water resources, fertile soil etc. But in spite of all these, the region and its indigenous people have remained underdeveloped for long. This has raised a question into the minds of the people regarding the priorities of the state government. In spite of the fact that the resources have contributed a large share in creating national wealth; the people of this region are still alienated, oppressed and discriminated. The feeling of betrayal was aggravated with the imbalance in development policies which aimed at elevating the economic status of the already affluent, all the time asking for sacrifices from the already dispossessed.<sup>73</sup> For example in recent years due to the inclination of government towards cash crop cultivation like tea, jute etc a number of tea gardens have come up in the Dooars and Terai region.

The burden of the economy of the region together with the influx of immigrants also pushed the region towards underdevelopment. The geographical location of the region makes it a strategic entry point from the different neighbouring countries of Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh.<sup>74</sup> The failure of the government to check the illegal migrants has further burdened the economy of the region and worsened the situation. This has led to pressure on lands and jobs, or petty trade and commerce, accompanied by conflicts between the powerful Indian bourgeoisies and regional bourgeoisies, the declining preponderance of the indigenous community and above all the growing fear of losing their identity has today pushed this region into turmoil.<sup>75</sup>

Though the demand for the Kamatapur state has been there in both West Bengal and Assam since the 1990's, it came into limelight only after the Royal Bhutan Army attacked the camps of Kamatapur Liberation Organisation (KLO) situated in Bhutan in the month of December, 2003 in what was called "Operation All Clear" by the security experts in India and Bhutan.<sup>76</sup> The movement saw another momentum in 2005, when thousands of members of Greater Cooch Behar People's Association challenged the Left Government of West Bengal through their indefinite hunger strike and mass protest in their demand for a separate Cooch Behar State known as Kamatapur.

Kamatapur is a demand for statehood comprising areas of both Assam (specifically Lower Assam) and the northern tip of West Bengal. The present Kamatapur movement draws its motivation highly from the history of Kamatapur.

The idea is to see the historic Kamatapur kingdom in the present form of a federal unit of India. In the post-independence scenario, this historical region disappeared in the formation of modern Assam, West Bengal and Bangladesh.<sup>77</sup> Like the Kamatapur region its history also vanished in the nationalistic history writings of Bengali and Assamese and it became partly Bengali history and partly Assamese history. In Assam, history of Kamatapur became history of Goalpara or West Assam and in West Bengal it is the history of North Bengal.<sup>78</sup> So, the Rajbanshi language became Goalpariya dialect of Assamese in Assam and North Bengal dialect in West Bengal. Indeed, the present demand for Kamatapur by the Koch Rajbanshi also seeks acknowledgment of history and culture of Kamatapur.

However unlike Bengal, the situation in Assam is different. The failure of the Assamese to accommodate the tribal identity into their culture has caused the feeling of separation among the Koch Rajbanshi. However the Koch Rajbanshi's present attempt to dissociate themselves from the Assamese identity and challenging the same by seeking recognition of Kamatapuri identity in Assam is rather surprising as they had always been part of the Assamese society in the past.<sup>79</sup> Even in the Assam Movement, the Koch Rajbanshi had stood along with them.

The undivided Goalpara district which was a sizeable portion of the historical Kamatapur region became a part of Assam under the Koch Rajbanshi leader, Late Sarat Chandra Singha's initiative.<sup>80</sup> The foremost demand of the Koch Rajbanshi in Assam is the inclusion of the Koch Rajbanshi into the Scheduled Tribe (ST) category. Otherwise the demand for Kamatapur is comparatively a new one in Assam. Infact, the All Assam Koch Rajbanshi Sammilani which has been demanding the Scheduled Tribe status for the Koch Rajbanshi of Assam since 1966, had once opposed the demand for a separate state of kamatapur made by the Kamata Rajya Sangram Parishad in and around 1969.<sup>81</sup> This clearly shows that the feeling of alienation was not there among the Koch Rajbanshi initially. Some of the historians are also of the view that the Koch Rajbanshi demand for a separate state of Kamatapur would not have been there had they been given the Scheduled Tribe status in Assam. However, the matter which further aggravated the issue was the inclusion of the Koch Rajbanshi dominated areas into the Bodoland Territorial Councils (BTC) without consulting the Koch Rajbanshi leaders.<sup>82</sup>

The study of the Kamatapur Movement reveals two different trends in Bengal and Assam.<sup>83</sup> When the identity Kamatapur Kingdom was still a reality in Bengal in the form of Cooch Behar princely state, the Rajbanshis were fighting against the social harassments meted out to them by the upper caste Hindus through the Kshatriya Movement while the Koch Rajbanshi of Assam played no effective role in it. During that particular period the line between the royal family and common Koch Rajbanshi was clearer. During that period the inspiration for the movement was drawn from the mythological stories proving their Kshatriya origin rather than drawing inspiration from the Koch Royal family.<sup>84</sup> However in the post-independence period, when the Cooch Behar state disappeared, the Koch Rajbanshi protest movement gradually changed into a movement for territorial recognition of Kamatapur. Simultaneously, in Assam, the Koch Rajbanshi struggle for reservation changed to more radical territorial demand.

Thus we see that both in the case of West Bengal and Assam, history of Kamatapur played a vital role in inspiring the movement and to create a platform for common struggle for the Koch Rajbanshi of both West Bengal and Assam.<sup>85</sup>

During the pre-independence days the 'Hitasadhini Sabha' struggled for a separate state of Cooch Behar. This demand then was confined to a limited group and so was restricted in its spread. Later in 1969, a group called the Uttar Khanda Dal (UKD) renewed the idea for a separate homeland for the Koch Rajbanshi. It demanded the formation of the Kamatapur state, but was unable to make much political headway and was first replaced by the Kamatapur Gana Parishad in 1987, to be followed by Kamatapur Peoples' Party (KPP) in 1997.<sup>86</sup> Even in Assam, in the Goalpara district, an organization was formed called the Kamata Rajya Sangram Parisad (KRSP) which demanded the Kamata state in and around 1969. Though most of the leaders of the KRSP were from the Koch Rajbanshi community, there were also other prominent personalities from other communities of the historical Kamatapur region in the KRSP.<sup>87</sup>

At present, Kamatapur People's Party (KPP) which is a North bengal based political organization, is demanding the separate Kamatapur state for the Koch Rajbanshi community.<sup>88</sup> Their demand is only statehood and not sovereignty and are trying to realize their goal in a democratic manner. Besides, statehood, KPP is also

demanding the inclusion of the Kamatapuri (Rajbanshi) language in the Eighth Schedule and the propagation of the Kamatapuri language and culture through the state controlled radio and television.<sup>89</sup> **(Appendix - I)**

The KPP was formed in 1997 by Atul Roy and some of his close associates to agitate peacefully in a democratic way for the creation of Kamtapur state.<sup>90</sup> The Kamatapur People's Party (KPP) started with a joint endeavor by Atul Roy and Nikhil Roy. Around the years from 1991 to 1994, Atul Roy was involved in forming Kamatapur Yuva Sangathan and Kamatapur Liberation Front. It was during this period that he met Nikhil Roy and on 7<sup>th</sup> January, 1997, members of Koochbehar People's Association, Kamatapur Mukti Morcha, Malda Barindua Krishok Mukti Morcha and similar parties met at Nikhil Roy's house and formed the KPP<sup>91</sup> with Atul Roy as the President and Nikhil Roy as the General Secretary. But differences soon cropped up and an internal division took place in 2003. Atul Roy was dethroned and Nikhil Roy became the new President of the KPP and Subhash Burman became the General Secretary. Atul Roy then remained as a member of the central committee. However, in 2006 Atul Roy broke away from the KPP and formed the Kamatapur Progressive Party. But again in October 2010 both the parties merged again. It was then only the Kamatapur People's Party with Atul Roy as the President and Nikhil Roy as the General Secretary. But this unity was not destined to stay for long and it broke up again to be united on 09 August 2013. However, this unification again broke up on 7<sup>th</sup> July 2014 with Atul Roy forming the All Kamatapur people's Party. **(Appendix – J)**

Thus we see that the leadership of the Kamatapur Movement is caught up in a bitter struggle for power which is very clearly evident from the factions and frictions taking place very often. This very factor is to a large extent confusing the supporters of the movement and misleading them in some cases. At times the leaders become so engrossed in confronting each other in their struggle for power that the movement comes to its lowest ebb. Moreover the leaders of the movement vacillate on the issue of their proposed territory. They lack clarity and because of this they keep on shifting their territorial claims besides others.

In their original demand for Kamatapur state they included not only North Bengal but also Goalpara district of Assam though they were not very sure about this

district.<sup>92</sup> The central argument is that the North Bengal region originally belongs to the Kamatapuris who are predominantly Rajbashis, Meches, Khens and Koibartyas in caste terms and are culturally, linguistically, socially and historically distinct from the Bengalis.<sup>93</sup> It also argues that even though the Koch Rajbanshi constitutes 65 percent of the total population of North Bengal, yet they have lost their identity and the most vital cause of this identity crisis is the uninterrupted influx of the bhatias or outsiders to the land. The KPP also claims that the succeeding regimes in West Bengal are to blame for the economic backwardness of the region. According to them the dignity and the socio cultural identity of the indigenous people of this region and exploitation and neglect can only come to an end with the creation of the state of Kamatapur within the Indian Union.

There are several frontal organs that operate and mobilize support for the KPP. Some of these were formed earlier to the formation of the KPP and are directly linked to the KPP. Frontal organizations include a student's front called the All Kamatapur Student's Union (AKSU) formed in August 1994; the intellectual front Kamatapur Vasha Sahitya Parishad(KVSP) formed in 1998.<sup>94</sup> The All Kamatapur Students Union (AKSU) was formed in 1994 and was modeled on a similar framework of the All Assam Students Union (AASU). It functioned from the North Bengal University campus. Their main aim was a separate council for the proposed Kamatapur administration and acceptance of the Kamatapuri language as the chief language in section of education and media, and especially setting up of a department of Kamatapuri studies at North Bengal University in Siliguri.<sup>95</sup> Several sources claim that it was a section from AKSU front who led to the foundation of KLO.<sup>96</sup> With split of the KPP some of these mass organizations have also suffered splits, undergone changes and faced a lot of confusion.<sup>97</sup>

In Assam, the All Koch Rajbanshi Students Union (AKRSU), a student organization of the Koch Rajbanshi community has been raising the Kamatapur issue in many occasions. Besides Kamatapur, AKRSU is also demanding 'Scheduled Tribe' status for the community. The State Government in Assam has also requested the central Government for the recognition of the Koch Rajbanshi into the list for scheduled tribe (**Appendix – K**) and at present, the Central government has also given an assurance for it but the delay over it is still causing great resentment among the Koch Rajbanshi. (**Appendix – L**) The AKRSU also faces the similar problem of

friction and factions among its leaders. This organization has also been divided into two factions after differences cropped up. One of the factions is led by Biswajit Ray and another by Hiteswar Barman. The difference in the alliances and views of the leaders on certain matter is creating problem for the Government and also confusing the masses.

The most militant and debated of the organizations is the Kamatapur Liberation Organization (KLO). This organization depend more on bullets. The exact nature of the relationship that exists between the KPP and KLO is not known, though the ultimate demand of the two is same - the formation of a separate state of Kamatapur. It was formed on 28<sup>th</sup> December 1995. At the time of its formation, its cadre strength was estimated to be 60. However, subsequently, it is said to be operating with approximately 300 active cadres. This outfit is believed to have been abolished during the operation 'Flush out' by Royal Bhutan Army in the month of December 2003 in Bhutan.<sup>98,99,100</sup> Intelligence agencies say that the organization enjoys the backing of the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA).

The objective of the Kamatapur Liberation Organisation is to carve out a separate homeland called Kamatapur for the Koch Rajbanshi community comprising 6 districts of West Bengal namely Cooch Behar, Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri, North Dinajpur, South Dinajpur, Malda and four contiguous districts of Assam namely Kokrajhar, Bongaigaon, Dhubri and Goalpara.<sup>101</sup> The KLO has been apparently coordinating its militant activities with the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), which is demanding creation of an independent Assam. The fledging KLO militants are reportedly being groomed by seasoned militants from the ULFA in the Dooars region, the Buxa reserve forests, Cooch Behar and North Bengal's bordering areas with Assam and Bangladesh.<sup>102</sup> In recent times a number of attacks have taken place on the Communist Party Workers. Their main targets have been the CPI (M) activities since it considers the party the sole representatives of the 'Kolkattiya Bengalis' (Bengalis from Kolkata).<sup>103</sup>

At present the KLO has been consolidating its position in fourteen districts of Assam and six districts in West Bengal both organizationally and in terms of weapons and cadres and to achieve the objective of a separate "sovereign Kamatapur state".<sup>104</sup> The outfit is also resorting to terrorism in the form of killing of innocent citizens and

security forces and engaging in other violent activities including looting, kidnapping, landmine and bomb blasts. Having found to be involved in several recent blasts in West Bengal and in Assam, the KLO has been declared a banned terrorist group by the government in 2014.<sup>105</sup> **(Appendix – M)** Till recently the special forces were busy in curbing the activities of the KLO. For instance on 13<sup>th</sup> August 2015, the Army thwarted a terror attack bid in Assam with the killing of a suspected militant of KLO in an encounter. The operation took place in the dense jungles of Rabha Para in Kokrajhar district of Assam after the Army received information. According to reports, there were four militants, but only one of them was injured and later succumbed to his injuries. The body is yet to be identified. The militants were planning to plant a powerful IED on the Guwahati – Kokrajhar railway track to disrupt the Independence Day celebrations. An IED weighing around seven Kilograms had been recovered.<sup>106</sup>

Another instance was on 15<sup>th</sup> October 2015, when two persons identified as Jyoti Prasad Roy alias Jone and Matleb Hussain alias Manowar Hussain were arrested by Assam Police for alleged offence of extortion in the name of KLO. According to Police sources INR 5 million was demanded from a businessman Arup Saha, a resident of Senpara of Dhubri town (in Dhubri district) in the name of KLO.<sup>107</sup>

Apart from KLO, KPP, AKRSU and others there is also a distinguished organization called ‘The Greater Cooch Behar People’s Association’ (GCBPA), which also talk about a separate state for the people of North Bengal and Western Assam without stating the name Kamatapur. But except the name they are more or less talking about the same matters like KPP and others. The area of proposed ‘Greater Cooch Behar’ is almost same as that of the ‘Kamatapur’ of the All Koch Rajbanshi Student’s Union and the Kamatapur People’s Party.<sup>108</sup> The leaders have spoken highly of their glorious past i.e. the history of Kamrup – Kamatapur as well as the Rajbanshis narrated the anecdotes of their social status, and glorified the peaceful happy life of the Rajbanshis during the regime of Kamrup – Kamata Kings.<sup>109</sup> They have also tried to demonstrate the oppressed and depressed conditions of the indigenous people. The charter of demand of the Greater Koch Behar Movement submitted to the Union Home Minister on 18.6.2005 and their leaflet “Dangar Kuch Behar Bashir Katha ” ( A few submissions of Greater Cooch Behar people) are as follows:-

- 1) The Maharaja of Cooch Behar has not, of his own, agreed to the accession of the state to the Dominion of India.
- 2) In terms of the Instrument of Accession signed on 28.8.1949 and 30.8.1949 Cooch Behar state can never be merged with West Bengal vide D.O. No. 15(19)- P/49 dt 30.8.49 of V.P. Menon, the Indian Government communicated its intention to administer the State centrally by a Chief Commissioner, and so merger of the state with West Bengal as District is not legally tenable.
- 3) In terms of Section 7(1) of the Indian Independence Act,1947, the British Government abolished all agreements entered into during the period 1773 to 1902 by which the British Empire occupied the areas of present Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri, Uttar and Dakshin Dinajpur and Goalpara district of Assam which constituted the territories of Greater Kuch Behar . Greater Kuch Behar with the above areas should thus be a legally acceptable concept.
- 4) In terms of the Instrument of Accession, Cooch Behar has been a C – category State which cannot be merged with West Bengal, an A – category State by a notification under section 290A of the Government of India Act,1935.
- 5) In the agreement, the Government of India has communicated that it will take no important decision without Cooch Behar People’s mandate. In terms of the agreement, Government of India is promise – bound to meet the problems of Cooch Behar people.<sup>110</sup>

In the view of the above submissions, the Greater Cooch Behar people’s Association demands implementation of the conditions of Instrument of Accession by virtue of which Cooch Behar State has remained a C category State.

The Greater Cooch Behar Movement originated in 1998 and was publicized through an ‘Appeal’ dated 20.10.98 circulated by one Arun Kumar Roy on behalf of ‘The Greater Cooch Behar People’s Association’. The Appeal was addressed to the citizens of Cooch Behar stating that this movement on their behalf will start with the deputation to the District Magistrate on 26.10.98 with the following demands:

- 1) Movement against the negligence shown to the language and culture of Cooch Behar and against the suppression of history of the Kings of Cooch Behar.
- 2) Compulsory introduction of the history of Cooch Behar in the curriculum at the school level education.
- 3) Presentation of books procured by the Maharajas from different parts of the world and stored in the 125 years old rich library in Cooch Behar and printing and publishing of manuscripts stored in the library in book form.
- 4) Repairs and presentation of the historical temples and mosques constructed by the Royalty.
- 5) Stopping the efforts by the Debutter Trust Board to hand over the vacant land of Kalibari at Banaras and repairs to the Kalibari for restoring it.
- 6) Repairs and presentation of the historical buildings of Cooch Behar Maharajas, the Prayer Hall of the Brahma Samaj, Victor House etc.
- 7) Repairs of the roads of Cooch Behar.
- 8) Allowing Kumar Anilendra narayan to take over the charge of the President of the Debutter Trust Board for the management of the temples and Debutter properties.<sup>111</sup>

The Greater Cooch Behar People's Association was formed on 9<sup>th</sup> September 1998 at Kakbari School. The movement however gained stimulus in the second half of 2003. Incidentally it gained popularity at a time when the KPP was weakening due to a split within the party. The Greater Cooch Behar People's Association (GCPA) went for a split and the Greater Cooch Behar Democratic Party was formed on 20<sup>th</sup> September 2006. The GCPA claims to be a development oriented organization and started mobilizing the Koch Rajbanshis and other ethnic minorities on the issue of a separate state of Cooch Behar.<sup>112</sup>

The GCPA has been demanding the formation of a separate Greater Cooch Behar State comprising Cooch Behar, Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri, North Dinajpur, South Dinajpur and the undivided Goalpara district of Assam.<sup>113</sup> They argue that Cooch

Behar, which was a princely state became a part of India on 20 August 1950. According to them, the manner in which Cooch Behar became a part of West Bengal dishonored the terms of the agreement. The leaders of the movement allege that the inclusion of Cooch Behar in West Bengal was illegal as during the time of the signing of the agreement between the King of the princely state and the Government of India, Cooch Behar was promised a 'C' category state, but it was merged with an 'A' category state.<sup>114</sup> Therefore, the GCPA demands the implementation of Cooch Behar and the Government of India.

The form of agitation by the GCPA and the GCDP had been submission of memorandums picketing, representation and demonstrations.<sup>115</sup> They have placed their demands by sending memorandum to the central and state government time and again. In July 2005, clashes between the GCPA supporters and the state police led to violence killing of 6 people. Recently, in March 2015, a protest was organized by the Greater Koch Behar People's Association at Jantar Mantar. The people went on hunger strike since March 10 in the capital demanding a separate state. The situation worsened when the protesters felt unconscious and was rushed to hospitals. According to the Times of India, more than 300 protesters fell unconscious. Later the protest was called off after the Home Minister Mr Rajnath Singh promised to look into the matter.<sup>116</sup> **(Appendix – N)**

The state government is using two strategies in order to counter the movement for a separate state of Greater Cooch Behar.<sup>117</sup> It had used powerful arm strategies. It also claims to use progress of the region to counter the movement. The latter form is quite ambiguous because in the initial phase of the movement they have claimed that North Bengal is not a deprived region but later with the progress of the movement they have hinted greater funds for the movement thus accepting the fact that North Bengal is an underdeveloped region.<sup>118</sup>

Thus a number of organizations and associations are directly or indirectly spearheading the Kamatapur Movement. Although their demand varies in one way or the other they are unanimous on their demand for a Kamatapur State. Another common factor is that they all draw their inspiration from the historical Kamatapur or Kamata Kingdom particularly the Kamata Kingdom also known as Koch – Kingdom that was established in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and which survived till 1950 through various

ups and downs.<sup>119</sup> The Kamata Kingdom of 16<sup>th</sup> century went through different names and settled as Cooch Behar (Koch Behar). With the Independence of India, Cooch Behar decided to be part of Independent India. Later, in 1950 Cooch Bihar was merged with West Bengal as a district of it. The leaders of the present Kamatapur Movement considers this merger of Cooch Behar as a district of West Bengal as against the will of the people and has placed it as one of the chief arguments in support of their demand for a separate state of Kamatapur.

At present a number of dialogues are being held with the state (in both the states of Assam and West Bengal) and central government in order to bring about a settlement and end to the prolonged chaos in both the states. But as of now the talks have not resulted into kind of settlement. Moreover with the increase in the number of organizations and associations, the demands have also started varying and sometimes clashing. This is adding on to the difficulty of coming to any concrete conclusion. However, the leaders of the Kamatapur movement feel that the Government should find a way out to accommodate their nationalism within prevailing nationalism like Assamese and Bengali. According to them it is not just a movement for territorial restructuring, nor is it just a movement for economic development. Therefore, more economic packages and territorial tweaking are not likely to solve this conflict.<sup>120</sup> The Kamatapur Movement today speaks in many idioms- cultural demands that seek recognition, moderate political demands that seek autonomy, and also more militant political – cultural demands that find expression in the idiom of violence.<sup>121</sup> Though these expressions they are trying to say that they are a people with a glorious past seeking dignity, self-respect, justice and autonomy.<sup>122</sup> They argue to the very fact of a community having dual identity – Bengali in North Bengal and Assamese in Lower Assam.

There are three dimensions of the Kamatapur movement- cultural, economic and political.<sup>123</sup> The leaders of the movement argue that the natives of the region are culturally different from the Bengalis and the Assamese and have nothing in common with them. They also contradict the claim that the language of the Koch Rajbanshi is just mere dialects of the Bengali and Assamese language and not a separate language. Rather they maintain that the Kamatapuri language precedes the Bengali and Assamese language. They also maintain that these two languages must have arisen from the Kamatapuri language.

As regards the economic dimension, most of their criticism is directed towards the Left Front Government. In an interview to Tapas Ganguly, Atul Roy alleged that there has been no development in North Bengal after independence. The worst affected are the Kamatapuris, who have lost their land and are unable to find jobs. The situation has gone from bad to worse during the 26 years of Left Front Rule.<sup>124</sup>

As regards the political dimensions, the leaders of the Kamatapur Movement has participated in the electoral politics since the late 1990s and have met with various degree of success but this success has been more at the local level Panchayat elections than in the Assembly or the Parliamentary elections.<sup>125</sup> So far as the assembly and parliamentary elections are concerned, they have been unsuccessful.

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